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AUTHOR Tweto-Johnson, Linda
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ABSTRACT

The goal of a 2-year vision teacher training project is to provide the coursework instruction and student teaching opportunities necessary for Oregon certification as teacher of the visually impaired. The program was designed in response to several conditions affecting services for visually impaired students living in seven eastern Oregon counties: (1) nationwide shortage of teachers for the visually impaired; (2) population sparsity--50 visually impaired students scattered within 28,000 square miles; (3) geographic and climatic barriers affecting teacher recruitment and retention; (4) lack of certified vision teacher applicants from Oregon universities or out-of-state programs; and (5) absence of locally accessible certification and training programs. Coursework instruction and supervision are provided through a cooperative effort between Portland State University vision department staff and Eastern Oregon Regional Program vision teacher staff. Funding is provided in part by a cooperative planning council grant from the Oregon Department of Education and local district contributions. Project participants are certified teachers desiring to change specialization fields, e.g., resource room teachers whose positions have been eliminated through the reduction in force process. Local access to coursework has eliminated the geographical, financial, and climatic barriers that have previously prevented teachers from retraining in the field of vision. (JHZ)

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CERTIFICATION FOR TEACHERS OF THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED:

A Rural Teacher Training Project

By

Linda Tweto-Johnson

October 1986

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Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Rural and Small Schools Consortium (Bellingham, WA, October 7-10, 1986).

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CERTIFICATION FOR TEACHERS OF THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED:
A Rural Teacher Training Project

ABSTRACT

The Administrative Unit of Union Education Service District's Regional Program, and the Regional Program's Handicapped Education Advisory Council, have identified the certification and retention of teachers of the visually impaired as a major priority for service to Region I's rural communities.

Several factors have impacted service delivery to visually impaired students living in the seven counties served by the Eastern Oregon Regional Program:

A. A nationwide shortage of teachers for the visually impaired;

B. Population sparsity (50 visually impaired students scattered within 28,000 square miles);

C. Geographical and climate barriers affecting teacher recruitment and retention;

D. A lack of certified vision teacher applicants from Oregon universities or out-of-state programs; and

E. An absence of locally accessible certification and training programs.

The goal of the two-year vision teacher training project is to provide the coursework instruction and student teaching opportunities necessary for Oregon certification as teachers of the visually impaired. Coursework instruction and supervision are provided through a cooperative effort between Portland State University vision department staff and Eastern Oregon Regional Program vision teacher staff. Funding has been provided in part by a cooperative planning council grant from the Oregon Department of Education and local district contributions.

Project participants are certified teachers desiring to change specialization fields, i.e., resource room teachers or certified teachers whose teaching positions have been eliminated through the "Reduction In Force" process, or certified teachers on the district's substitute teacher lists who have been unable to secure teaching positions within their communities.

Local access to coursework has eliminated the geographical, financial, and climatic barriers which have previously prevented teachers from re-training in the field of vision. Research indicates that teachers who are trained in their own communities

tend to remain and provide services to their communities, as opposed to out-of-state applicants who may only wish to remain in the community for a short period of time.

Participants completing the two-year program will be eligible for certification as teachers of the visually impaired and will have hiring preference for vision teacher position vacancies.

Linda Tweto-Johnson, Ed.D.
Regional Programs Coordinator
Union Education Service District
Rt. 4 Box 4778
La Grande, Oregon 97850
(503) 963-4106

CERTIFICATION FOR TEACHERS OF THE VISUALLY IMPAIRED:

A Rural Teacher Training Project

The Eastern Oregon Regional Special Education Programs under the auspices of the Union Education Service District, for La Grande, Oregon, serve students ages birth to 21 years who are visually impaired, hearing impaired, autistic, or severely orthopedically impaired. As many of eastern Oregon's schools are located in rural areas and have only one or two students with these low-incidence, high-cost handicapping conditions, the majority of the students living in the seven counties served by the Regional Program receive services from itinerant teachers and specialists.

The Regional Program's philosophy is to provide equity in state funding and service delivery to children with these handicapping conditions. The Regional Program provides the vehicle for cost effective appropriate educational services.
The Eastern Oregon Regional Program is one of six Regional Programs serving Oregon students since 1983. An on-going concern for the Regional Program's Administrative Unit has been the certification and retention of teachers of the visually impaired. The Handicapped Education Council (advisory group to the Eastern Oregon Regional Program), the ESD Superintendent's and the Special Education Directors within the seven counties of the Region have identified the certification and retention of vision teachers as a major priority for service delivery to our rural communities.

PROBLEMS

Several factors have impacted service delivery to Region I's visually impaired students:

A. A nation wide shortage of teachers of the visually impaired;

B. Population sparsity;

C. Geographical and climate barriers affecting recruitment and retention;

D. A lack of certified vision teacher applicants; and

E. An absence of locally accessible training programs.

Several of these significant recruitment/rentention factors have been documented in Helge's (1981) national study on rural teacher turnover. Helge reported that teacher turnover rates were most directly affected by low salaries, geographic and climate barriers to service delivery, certification requirements and the availability of training programs.

This nation-wide shortage of vision teachers has been felt acutely in rural areas. Rural school districts frequently have to compete with urban districts for the limited numbers of available vision teachers. Many teachers consider urban distict teaching positions more desirable because of the higher salaries, access to professional growth opportunities, and a wider variety of available recreational and social opportunities. Additionally, vision teachers aware of the availability of positions nation-wide frequently choose to spend only a year or two in a rural area before moving on to a different geographical location, which leaves districts to readvertise position vacancies. This frequent turnover of staff directly affects program continuity and on-going service delivery to students.

The population sparsity found in rural areas has a definite impact on delivery to low-incident, high-cost handicapping conditions, such as the visually impaired. Region I has 50 visually impaired students scattered within the 28,000 square miles of its boundaries. Teachers must travel long distances to serve students. Harsh winter weather conditions in the mostly mountainous areas of the Region further impede service and directly affect teacher morale. Out-of-state applicants who expect to find resource or self-contained classroom programs for the visually impaired are often disappointed in the realities of itinerant travel conditions, leading to more frequent vision teacher turnover.

Like many other states, Oregon is not alone in its concern for the lack of certified vision teacher applicants. Parsons (1986) reported that there are few vision teacher training programs within the United States and even in states, such as California and Texas, with large training programs shortages remain. Oregon's vision teacher training program at Portland State University graduates three to five students annually, but its program is unable to meet the existing need for vision teachers within the state. As Parsons (1986) further pointed out, the high demand for vision teachers does not generate large class enrollments in the vision teacher training program when teacher shortages also exist in other areas of special education.

Access to teacher training programs in rural communities has seriously affected programs for visually impaired students. Few teachers are willing to travel 250 miles or more to Portland for

vision teacher training coursework , particularily during the harsh winter weather. Many teachers are unable to leave families and current employment to participate in teacher training programs, even when financial assistance for on campus programs is available.

SOLUTIONS

Teacher training programs which provide local access to vision certification coursework eliminate the geographical, financial and climatic barriers which have previously prevented teachers from retraining in the field of vision. Research (Twesto-Johnson, 1984) indicates that staff who are trained in their own communities tend to remain and provide services to their own communities, as opposed to out-of-state applicants who may only wish to remain in the community for a short period of time.

GOAL

The goal of the two-year vision teacher training project is to provide the coursework instruction and student teacher training opportunities necessary for Oregon certification as teachers of the visually impaired.

This two- year program was made possible through the cooperative efforts of Portland State University Vision Department staff, Eastern Oregon Regional Program Administrative Unit staff and the Oregon Department of Education.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants for the training project are certified teachers living within the seven counties served by Region One. An informational flyer describing the vision training project was distributed by the Special Education Directors and ESD Superintendents to all schools within the Region. The training project targeted as participants those teachers desiring to change specialization fields, i.e. resource room teachers desiring a change within special education areas, or certified teachers whose positions had been eliminated through the "reduction in force" process, or certified substitute teachers who had been unable to secure teaching positions within their own communities.

FUNDING

Funding for the training project was derived from two sources: The Administrative Unit successfully competed for a $3500 Cooperative Personnel Planning Council (CPPC) grant from the Oregon Department of Education, and also utilized $500 of local district contributions for the project.

CPPC grant funding provided trainer/consultation fees, trainer per diem costs, actual trainer travel costs (airfare and mileage for airport pickup) and a small amount for supplies and materials. Local funds were used to assist in the community awareness and inservice training efforts for vision teacher aides, parents and other community members as a part of the total training project.

PRELIMINARY PLANNING

Prior to applying for CPPC grant funds, the Administrative Unit discussed the possibility of a local vision teacher training program with the Portland State University vision staff and Special Education Department staff. The Portland State staff provided input with regards to Oregon certification coursework requirements and actively participated in the project planning to create a viable rural training project.

With the formal notification of CCPC grant funds for the project, the Administrative Unit and Portland State continued to work cooperatively to bring the training program to reality in eastern Oregon. The Portland State Continuing Education Department Director eased hurdles encountered with PSU registration requirements for off-campus coursework and also worked with the college of education dean to make the Regional Programs vision staff temporarily PSU adjunct faculty members for the duration of the teacher training project. This assured local expertise and input as well as providing the means for completing the remaining coursework after the completion of the grant funding.

Additionally, Portland State eased the minimum student enrollment requirements from 20 students to 12 students taking into account the smaller number of course participants in a rural area. Without this assistance and committment to the training project, the coursework could not have succeeded. Instructor fees were paid out of revenues generated by the individual course enrollments. Portland State instructors generously offered to provide the instruction for a reduced fee. Regional Program vision staff were also paid small instructor fees based on enrollment revenues.

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PROJECT PLAN

ACTIVITY I - Project Information Dissemination
TIMELINE - October, 1985
OUTCOMES - Interested participants will return applications to Union ESD Regional Program for training session planning.
EVALUATION - Participant selection and scheduling of sessions
FOLLOW-UP - An introductory session outlining the training project, course of study, project requirements, practicums, etc., will be held prior to initiation of coursework.

ACTIVITY II -Coursework offered
TIMELINE - November, 1985 July, 1987
OUTCOMES - Completion of Portland State University coursework
EVALUATION - Participants required to maintain a C average. Participants will adhere to course work syllabus and requirements. PSU faculty and adjunct faculty will evaluate progress on quarterly basis
FOLLOW-UP - Region I vision staff and Coordinator will provide supervision of practicum courses and advise PSU faculty of participants' progress

ACTIVITY III-Community awareness
TIMELINE - November, 1985-August, 1986
OUTCOMES - PSU faculty and Region I vision staff will provide community awareness sessions for vision teacher aides, parents and community members
EVALUATION - Attendance figures for awareness sessions
FOLLOW-UP - Region I vision staff to continue to disseminate information about visually impaired students to interested community agencies through presentations, newsletters and media

ACTIVITY IV -Certification
TIMELINE - August, 1986 July, 1987
OUTCOMES - Participants completing all coursework and practicums will apply for Oregon vision teacher certification - TSPC
EVALUATION - Applicants will receive Oregon vision teacher certification
FOLLOW-UP - PSU faculty will assist applicants in the certification process

ACTIVITY V - Vision Teacher Assignments
TIMELINE - 1987-88 school year
OUTCOMES - Training project, certified applicants will receive hiring preference for vision teacher vacancies
EVALUATION - Existing position vacancies for certified vision teachers to be filled from project participants

FOLLOW-UP - Applicants for participants who were not hired will remain on file with preference given for additional vacancies. These applicants will become the basis of a vision cadre to provide inservice training on visually impaired students in the areas of identification/evaluation and to participate in the multidisciplinary team IEP development as needed

PROJECT ACTIVITIES

I. Develop a course of study through Portland State University to meet Oregon vision endorsement requirements.

II. Identify instructors from Portland State University and Regional Program vision staff. Work out details regarding minimum enrollments, registration requirements and instructors fees.

III. Identify Region-wide those certified elementary and secondary teachers interested in retraining and certification as teachers of the visually impaired.

IV. Provide the coursework within Region I (weekend classes combined with summer session). All coursework necessary for endorsement may be completed within a two-year timeline.

V. Applicants completing endorsement coursework apply to TSPC for Oregon certification.

VI. Administrative Unit interviews and hires qualified project participants as positions open.

VII. Applicants not immediately hired will provide a cadre of trained vision educators to provide inservice training and

PROJECT COURSEWORK TIMELINE

YEAR I

February - March 1986	SPED 510	Instruct Models/Methods (Regional Programs Vision staff instructors)
April 1986	SPED 510	Educ of Vis Impaired (Portland State instructor)
June 1986	SPED 531	Implications Vision Problems (Portland State instructor)
	SPED 510	Clinical Evaluation (Testing Methods) (Portland State instructor)
	SPED 509	Clinical Practicum (Testing Methods) (Portland State instructor)

YEAR II

Fall 1986	SPED 520	Prescriptive Teaching (Regional Programs Vision Staff Instructor)
Winter 1987	SPED 510	Braille System 1 (Portland State instructor w/Regional Vision Staffinstructors)
	SPED 521	Behavior Mgmt (Regional Program vision staff instructor)
Spring 1987	SPED 510	O/M For Classroom Teacher (Regional Programs Vision staff instructor)
Summer 1987	SPED 509	Student Teaching: Vision (Portland State Instructor w/Regional vision staff instructors)

RESULTS

During the course of the 1985-86 school year project coursework for year one was provided through weekend sessions (three Friday nite/Saturday combinations for each course offered) spread throughout each quarter, and in a two week summer session. Participants in the two-week summer session enrolled concurrently in three courses (SPED 531, SPED 510 and SPED 509) and attended classes daily from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. to meet PSU contact hour requirements. Immediately following the two-week summer session students completed the practicum course requirements under the supervision of Regional Programs vision staff. Coursework instruction and supervision are provided through a cooperative effort between Portland State University vision department staff and the Eastern Oregon Regional Program vision staff.

One distinct advantage to a teacher re-training project is the level of skill participants bring to the project. As certified teachers the participants generally have solid skills in the essential elements of instruction and some are already familiar with the special education instructional process. The condensed coursework provided by this training project is a challenge for any student, and the certified teachers enrolled in the project are active participants with excellent ideas for instructional techniques and methods. Projects generated by the group to meet coursework requirements were often "snapped up" and utilized by the Regional vision techers for use with their own students out in the field. The training project participants exhibited a high level of committment to the project (many drove 2 hours or more to reach the coursework sites) and a desire to continue with the second year of the program.

The CPPC grant funds are designed to provide local inservice training opportunities for a period of one fiscal year. The course of study created by the Portland State staff enabled the project to provide the majority of the PSU coursework during the grant funding period. For the second year the coursework will be offered with Regional Programs vision staff as the main instructors. Portland State staff have generously offered their time and talents to consult with project participants and Regional Program staff for the remainder of the project. This cooperative consultation and instruction arrangement has been instrumental to the success of the project.

Portland State staff have seen first hand the dilemmas of providing services in rural areas and have committed themselves to assisting the project. The Regional Programs vision staff have had an opportunity to showcase their own talents and

teaching skills while providing participants with an orientation to the realities of an itinerant position in rural communities. Participants have had an opportunity to increase their professional growth skills and enhance their employability opportunities within the communities they have chosen for their homes.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS

I. One problem encountered with the training project has been the lack of available funds for tuition stipends or scholarships for off-campus participants. At the beginning of the project 30 teachers expressed in interest in the teacher re-training project. The opportunity to complete locally the necessary coursework in a two year period was a powerful drawing card. Unfortunately, many of the interested teachers were currently unemployed and could not afford the tuition costs for the project. Vision teacher scholarships were not available for off-campus courses and the CPPC grant funds could only be used for trainer/ consultant expenses. As a result, only 12 participants were able to enroll in project coursework.

   Agencies considering a vision teacher re-training project must also consider locating funds for tuition stipends for participants. Some districts provide partial reimbursement for approved coursework. Districts may also consider working cooperatively with other districts to provide tuition stipend funds while working with their own State Department of Education programs for assistance in developing a vision training project to meet the needs of their rural communities.

II. Teachers completing the eastern Oregon two-year re-training project will not be available for the classroom until the 1987-88 school year. To meet current teacher vacancies the Regional Program provides several vision teacher aides as funds allow. The teacher aides are either assigned solely to one visually impaired student, (and are supervised by the itinerant vision teacher) or, vision teacher aides may be travelling itinerant aides also supervised by the itinerant vision teacher. With the completion of the training project, the Regional Program expects to have several certified teachers ready to apply for vacant positions.

III. The number of project participants who will be certified by the end of the two year project will probably exceed the number of available position vacancies. Certified training project applicants will receive hiring preference for all vision teacher vacancies. This will reduce the costs for

out-of-state applicant searches, position vacancy advertising, and travel costs for out-of-state interviews with vision teacher applicants. All training project participants not hired will remain on file for future vacancies.

In addition, training project applicants who were not hired form the basis of a vision specialist cadre to provide inservice training, provide assistance to the local districts in the areas of identification/evaluation, methods and materials for the regular classroom, and as participants in the multidisciplinary team for IEP development as the need arises.

IV. The methods for coursework presentation are not limited to weekend/summer sessions utilized by this training project. Teleconferences, videotape courses (Parsons, 1986, Tweto-Johnson, 1985) and other innovative scheduling/presentation approaches are also useful to training project planners. Cooperative training ventures with state and local community resources, colleges and universities and local district personnel are only as limited as the time and funding constraints of the project.

CONCLUSION

Eastern Oregon's vision teacher training project is a viable solution to current shortages for teachers of the visually impaired. The project's overall administrative low cost combined with local access for certification coursework has assured the availability of vision teachers to meet current and future needs.

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